

AS IF A SOJOURNER
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I remember flying into Columbus for the first time. As the plane descended, I recall looking out the plane's window and viewing flat land as far as I could see. miles and miles all flat of green and gold: I knew I was a sojourner -- a foreigner to this place. While I had lived in many parts of the world I had never known country without mountain or ocean. To my mostly east coast past, this was truly the mid-west. This part of the country I had only known through writers like Carl Sandburg and Willa Cather. After three years, I have grown to love the scattered farmland of this flat state. Interesting, but mid-west is now east in my way of thinking.

I had come here to accept a call to ministry in this congregation. I came in faith not unlike what I imagine were the responses of Abraham and Sarah and Ruth. Such moves mean feelings of excitement and anticipation as well as fear and uncertainty. I'm not sure what the areas of Haran and Moab -- the home spots of Abraham and Ruth -- were like, but I knew I was leaving the intellectual riches of Princeton and the excitement of New York City and Philadelphia. My eastern friends teased me of mid-west conservatism and an "Impeach Earl Warren" sign that they were sure was a Columbus landmark. What fun instead to find a skyline of "Columbus -- we're making it great!"

But I was nevertheless a sojourner -- an alien. And I looked forward, as did Abraham and Sarah, to the "city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Since this is my last day as a pastor to this congregation, I would like to share some of the wanderings of my three year's sojourning here with you. Someone asked me recently what gift I would like to give this congregation as I leave. The question helped me focus on what I hope I have already given. But it also made me consider all that I have been given by you. I'd like to share just a little of that with you.

It has been a great privilege to be the first ordained woman pastor to this congregation. I came as an alien to the position. I had no role models, no tradition, no pattern to follow. I learned on the road, with the help and forgiveness of strangers and friends. The advantages, I'm happy to say, have equalled the liabilities. I recall one woman sitting in my office telling some very hurtful experiences. Suddenly, she caught herself and said in embarrassment, "I completely forgot you were a minister." How wonderful on occasion to be freed from the baggage so often associated with clergy!

Being a woman in an historically male profession is not always easy. The God who has called me to freedom is also the God of the Church which has not encouraged women in professional leadership positions. At times the rejection has been acute. The issue has been one of great faith struggle for me. But one in which God's call to "Go from your home...to the land that I will show you" has always been louder than those who have wanted to block the path. I have learned -- in the limited way a white, middle-class person can learn -- the meaning of oppression and the longings to be free. This understanding has enabled me to respond with some greater intentionality to the needs of women and minorities in this congregation and community. This church stands in the place to meet unique urban problems. I have been able to minister in your name in meaningful ways. Referrals of problem pregnancies and agonizing abortions, of domestic abuse and mental confusion have come my way on a regular basis. One such woman suggested I tell you a little of her story. She was referred to me the

Years ago, Presbyterian theologian James Smart saw and wrote that the traditional functions of the family were being stripped away like so many layers from an onion. "Whose fault is it?" he asked and answered, "No one's and everyone's." After all, we are the ones who asked the schools, for instance, to teach values as well as reading. We are the ones who expect religion to be taught by the church school, outdoor skills by the scouts, social graces by the dancing class, and athletic ability by little league. We are the major conspirators in turning parenting into the task of delivering one's children, literally, into the hands of a multitude of expert teachers and then waiting patiently in the parking lot, listening to the car radio, to take them home afterward. We have turned the home into the 24-hour-a-day cafeteria and motel where the inhabitants occasionally bump into one another coming and going.

This is no lament, by the way. Just a description of the world in which we live and a plea to understand that the home didn't fall apart because of some moral flaw in the American character or because of permissiveness or because we don't use McGuffey's readers. The whole world changed.

James Smart helped us see that the functions were placed elsewhere, for better or worse. And now, we are seeing that the forms are changing too. Now, a very interesting dynamic begins to operate at this point. American mobility created the nuclear family. What does home, as a place, mean when one has lived in many cities? The place you were born, where you spent the biggest portion of time? With the exception of the fortunate few, most of us do not live close to grandparents, aunts, uncles - the truly traditional family. "Nuclear families are a new invention," Margaret Mead said, "and not a particularly good one." They cannot bear the weight we have placed on them. They need the reinforcing strength of the extended family, and in its absence, some supportive, loving community which becomes a family. A friend of mine, nearing retirement, is a grandfather whose grandchildren live hundreds of miles away. He told me he takes a walk before dinner - to talk to the neighborhood children. He told me that it's hard to be a grandfather and to have no grandchildren close enough to love.

It is the Festival of the Christian home throughout the Church today: the traditional Mother's Day with a broader scope. It is a time to recall that the one thing we all have in common is a genesis. We were brought into being by a miracle of strong love. We had a home. We had or have a mother and father and we carry, hidden deep in our hearts and minds and spirits, a rich treasure of love and formative nurture. That treasure is unique for each of us. And in its variety and particularity it is good to get in touch with it, celebrate it, give God thanks for it.

The faith, I find, is a strong resource for the task. The Bible, for instance, is refreshingly - almost embarrassingly - realistic about home and family. We may romanticize and sentimentalize the nuclear family, but the Judeo-Christian tradition doesn't. The motif gets off to a rocky start. Cain murders Abel practically on the first page. Noah's sons discover him in a drunken stupor. Abraham loans Sarah to Pharaoh for awhile to save his own skin. Jacob deceives his father, cheats his brother and plays his parents off against each other.

The Bible affirms the centrality of the home and family as the context for the human story to be told. But it does not oversimplify it, nor does it romanticize. In fact, the family and home in the Bible are portrayed honestly, faithfully and humanly.

to be different in a church from what I had been taught at Seminary. What came to my mind was this. That a multiple staff could not only work, but could work well. The word around Seminary was that multiple staffs should be avoided at all cost. The church is full of horror stories. I'm happy to say that hasn't been my experience. Working with John and Gerry and Jerry has been creative and free and challenging and supportive. Biblically put, that's a Blessing!

I began by telling you of my friend who asked what gift I would like to leave the congregation. My thought was I think it may be too late -- I hope the gift has already been given. As I reflect on my ministry here I would like to think it centered on two areas: an encouragement for serious theological searching and thought, and a helping to build a greater sense of community within the congregation. However, I would like to leave two other gifts for the future. For sojourners never arrive, but are always on the move and God has called each of you to this journey in faith.

I would hope for the gift of more action by this congregation. We talk a lot about issues, and problems and even make statements of policy. But how do we put our ideas into action. How do we influence institutions and structures and legislation. Thomas Merton wrote, "There is always a temptation to diddle around in the religious life, making it'sy-bitsy statues." The philosopher Annie Dillard expounded upon this idea and wrote, "There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making small friends and meals and journeys for small years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down. I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus." May this congregation have greater courage to act. May this congregation have the courage to raise Cain and Lazarus!

Ruth tells the story of one who stood between the native and the alien land. Her choice to leave the world she had known to journey with her mother-in-law Naomi must have involved feelings of unrest, insecurity and limitations. Serenity and security seemed out of the picture for her. The story doesn't tell us, for I imagine, it cannot be explained, how she makes the choice to go with her mother-in-law. What the story does tell us is that God was a part of the decision. And so I would wish you a life of living as "if a sojourner." In Nietzsche's words this means moving "into the land of our children" and out of the "land of our fathers and mothers." It means seeking God's Kingdom as "strangers, nomads, aliens and exiles." Sojourn -- do not settle. A recent National Geographic article told of an amateur Japanese astronomer who in 1982 discovered a nova. The article told how professional astronomers miss such new occurrences because they spend a large measure of their time looking at known objects. To do so is to miss God's call to go out from the place we know to the land of promise. God seems to say to us, "Let there be the grit of sand on your teeth, a relentless sun in your face, a beckoning wind across the desert, and a holy wanderlust stirring in your veins."

I say this to myself, as well as to you. For I am experiencing the desire to stay with the familiar, with the home I have grown to love. I believe God is calling me to serve in another ministry in the world. I go in faith as if a sojourner -- rich in the gifts you have given me. I go saying with Abraham and Sarah and Ruth, "By faith I sojourn in the land of promise, as in a foreign land. For I look forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

AMEN.

Abraham and Sarah never made it to the promised land. (see Raines, p. 117) They spent their lives making it. Home, the Bible seems to be saying, is not a place at all, but the pilgrimage, the journey, and most of all, the relationships.

In the best story of all about the topic - the one Jesus told - home for the prodigal is not a place, but a relationship: not his father's house so much as his father's love. Home, theology has always understood, has everything in the world to do with love.

Not to have it is to be homesick, alone, lost. To be loved is to be at home. When we find ourselves grieving over the disappearance of the past; when we lament the sorry state of the home and the family, we need, it seems to me, the Biblical word. It is a good and important word. If I am reading the story right, it is that home may be in the present and the future as well as the past; that the God who gave us life initially, calls us to the pilgrimage of our particular lives and promises to bless us with his presence wherever that leads. God, if I read correctly, is our true home, as the hymn puts it.

The word for those of us who are living in nuclear families, and who are struggling with and worrying about forces which seem far beyond our ability to control - is: don't despair. Be of good cheer. God thought enough of the arrangement to have his only son born into it. God chose the process of human birth for the incarnation to happen. God chose that fragile, yet creatively strong complex of relationships between mother, father, and child as the formative context for the savior of the world. The word for us is that the institution is worth saving, that it is worth striving for, praying about, studying, and sometimes weeping over. The word is to value it highly and appropriately: but not to conclude that we have failed miserably as parents or that the foundations of Western Civilization are crumbling because our family doesn't look or act like a romanticized version that never really did exist. And the word is a reminder not to oversimplify and in the process exclude from our world the people who do not live in nuclear families - which means the vast majority. The biblical word is a reminder to open our lives to larger families: to find the uncles, aunts, grandparents, friends, we - all of us - need.

And the word for those who are not living in nuclear families is that nuclear families are not the only places where God's people live: that God is at least as interested in those who are not as settled and fixed in place. Without hearing more than the Biblical witness, the word here is that Jesus, in fact, left the place, the relationships, the roles, in order to give himself to his vocation: but that through it all, his own sense of sonship to his own mother remained. God, the Bible suggests, sometimes uproots people, and sends them on difficult journeys. God, the Bible promises, will be particularly present on those journeys.

And for all of us, with or without traditional home and nuclear family, the word is profoundly clear. Each of us can be alone, an exile forever, lost. But we don't have to be. We are so constructed as to need and to thrive on the supportive love of some caring community - a family. The church, this beloved company, at its highest and best becomes that for each one of us.

The word is profoundly and finally simple. Home is not past alone. It is that, of course. It is memory which, this day, is lovingly recalled and celebrated. It is a reality which provided formative nurture to each of us in a particular way. It is a mother, a father, people who will forever be our lifegivers. Home is also this present: this day: these relationships, here and now. And it is also the journey ahead: the future into which God calls us; the future in which God promises to be with us and bless us, to gather up our precious memories in his strong love and to be, himself, our eternal home. AMEN.